

- Solution Would Permit Soldiers Stuck In Substandard Walter Reed Facilities the Option of Living in Outpatient Facilities Closer to Their Families and Homes While Army Processes Paperwork -

- Hall: "No Soldier Should Return From War Abroad to Live in No Man's Land at Home." -

Today Rep. John Hall (D-NY) wrote Defense Secretary Robert Gates and Veterans Affairs Secretary Robert Nicholson asking them to consider immediately moving all soldiers in substandard outpatient facilities at Walter Reed to a Veterans Affairs facility near their home while continuing to receive their military salary and benefits. Currently, most of the veterans are still at Walter Reed though not at the substandard facilities described by the Washington Post. Hall's letter also suggest increasing VA liaison officers at DoD facilities to assist injured service members transition from active duty to VA healthcare. Hall is a member of the Veterans Affairs Committee and Chairman of the Subcommittee on Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs.

Hall said that while he commended Secretary Gates the immediate problem of soldiers living in shoddy facilities still continued and should end immediately, "No soldier should come back from war abroad to live in no man's land at home. I commend Secretary Gates' swift response to the reports of substandard care at Walter Reed, but the fix won't be overnight. Soldiers are still languishing there, far from their homes and families."

Hall said his legislation was a common sense solution to a bureaucratic problem, "It's just common sense that when wounded soldiers come home, they should have the option of living in a VA facility close to their friends and family, while the Army sorts out their paperwork. It's not fair to ask them to sit in a creaky facility in northwest Washington."

Secretary Gates has pledged to add more casework staff to the facilities at Walter Reed and to upgrade the housing conditions at the facility as well. While these solutions could take some time to implement, under Hall's proposal in the interim the soldiers should be given the immediate option of moving to a VA facility closer to their homes so no more families are uprooted. Hall's legislation will be designed for the soldiers currently living at Walter Reed and will apply to all future wounded soldiers until Walter Reed facilities are substantially upgraded.

Hall is drafting legislation that would

- Give combat veterans staying at Walter Reed the option to live in a VA facility close to their home while still receiving Army pay and benefits
- Allow these veterans to continue receiving military salary and benefits and return to active duty should they qualify

The full text of Rep. Hall's letter is below:

February 27, 2007

The Honorable Robert M. Gates

Secretary of the Department of Defense
1000 Defense Pentagon
Washington, DC 20301-1000

The Honorable R. James Nicholson
Secretary of the Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20420

Dear Secretary Gates and Secretary Nicholson:

I write to you regarding the troubling state of care provided to the brave soldiers and Marines at Walter Reed Army Medical Center (WRAMC) as reported in a recent series of articles in the Washington Post. While I am pleased that the Army has strongly stated its intention to remedy this situation, I am concerned about the service members currently stationed in the outpatient centers at Walter Reed. As such, I urge the Department of Veterans Affairs and the Department of Defense to allow those currently in outpatient care at Walter Reed the option to move to a VA facility in their home area while continuing to receive their military salary and benefits.

I hope that the Department of Defense will take swift action to back up its stated desire to initiate a strong response to this issue and urge the Department to remedy the situation at Walter Reed as quickly as possible. However, we must focus on the needs of those currently being underserved. The delayed and mishandled care of these individuals has harmed their recovery and placed significant strain on their families. While they need and deserve the military pay they continue to receive as members of the Armed Services, it is clear the Army is not currently equipped to assist them at Walter Reed. Thus I ask your Departments to work together to give those currently in Walter Reed outpatient care the option to seek treatment at a VA facility near their home if they so choose. Although they would be under the care of the VA, they should remain on active duty status to allow them to continue to receive pay and to rejoin the service should they be fit for duty. This option should remain available until the Secretary of Defense certifies that Walter Reed Army Medical Center is capable of providing top quality outpatient care.

Allowing these patients to be treated closer to home will give their families the chance to resume a more normal life and likely will assist in the injured servicemember's recovery. They also deserve the best care our country can provide and it is clear that, at this moment, the facilities at Walter Reed cannot provide this. Our first priority should be the wellbeing of those who have sacrificed for our country. Thus I ask you to put aside bureaucratic red tape and work together to assist these soldiers and Marines.

Sincerely,

John J. Hall
United States Congress

Cc: The Honorable Robert Gates
Cc: The Honorable James Nicholson